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Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. This report is submitted in accordance with section E of General Assembly resolution 54/248 of 23 December 1999, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on the measures taken pursuant to the requests made therein by the end of April 2000 and decided to revert to the matter during its resumed fifty-fourth session. The measures in question refer to the equal treatment of the six official languages in the development and enhancement of the United Nations web sites, in the formalization of the structure of the Information Technology Section of the Department of Public Information, and in the improvement and updating of document access and retrieval from the United Nations web sites and from the optical disk system, at all duty stations. They also include the improvement of access to the web page of the Procurement Division, Office of Central Support Services, Department of Management.

II. Web sites and related issues

2. The major issues concerning the multilingual development of the United Nations web site are addressed in a report of the Secretary-General which has been prepared at the request of the General Assembly (resolution 54/82 B of 6 December 1999) for consideration by the Committee on Information at its twenty-second session, from 1 to 12 May 2000. This report will also be submitted to the Committee on Conferences at its substantive session of 2000. It has been issued under the symbol A/AC.198/2000/7-A/AC.172/2000/4 and is being made available to the General Assembly and the Fifth Committee at this time.

3. The conversion by the General Assembly, under resolution 54/249 of 23 December 1999, of three Professional posts in the Department of Public Information relating to web sites in Arabic, Chinese and Russian from general temporary assistance to regular budget posts was the first official allocation of resources to web site activity in the Department. Steps are now under way to formalize the recruitment to fill these posts. With the completion of this process, there will be one Professional-level web site coordinator for the management and coordination of the web site in each of the official languages.

4. Though this will not resolve the issue of parity treatment for the languages, it is a first step towards achieving that objective. The web site is a channel for the distribution of content, much like a radio or a television set or the pages of a newspaper. Creation of content for each of these media channels requires specific focus. The fundamental issue of content creation on an equal basis in the six languages will

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need to be revisited with a view to deciding on policy issues regarding the rendering of non-parliamentary and public information material into all official languages. Requiring parity in the official languages on the web site will also require that the concept of working languages in the Secretariat be reviewed. Once the primary materials are created in all languages, it would be relatively less expensive to make them available on the web site.

5. As requested by the General Assembly, the web page of the Procurement Division has been given more visibility by including links to it from the relevant areas of the main United Nations web site. Access to the page is now available from the following convenient and logical entry points on the main United Nations site: (a) under the *Business/Civil Society* button from the main page; (b) through the *Site Index*, listed alphabetically, under "P"; and (c) under the *General Information* button.

III. Optical disk system

6. Since its establishment as the electronic repository of United Nations documents, the optical disk system has ensured simultaneous retrieval in the six official languages. Documents have always been equally available in all languages for on-screen display and printing, regardless of the text-processing software with which they had been created. In the past, however, there were disparities between languages when users wished to open and cut-and-paste documents. Those disparities, which were partially a consequence of lags in the development of software for some languages by the computer industry, affected the Arabic and Russian versions. They have now been eliminated.

7. Until recently, Arabic and Russian documents were processed in WordPerfect 5.1, an antiquated software which lately has not been widely available among outside users, who have been working with more advanced software. This incompatibility made it impossible for those users to open and cut-and-paste documents retrieved in these two languages.

8. All the language units of the Text-Processing Section are now fully equipped to operate with MS Word 97 (MS Word 2000 in the Chinese Unit). Updated macros have been developed and staff training is about to be completed. During the period from 1 to 20 April, 86 per cent of the new documents were produced in MS Word for the six languages combined. The frequency of use of MS Word is increasing daily and full production in MS Word of all new documents in all languages will be achieved during the next few weeks.

9. In addition to facilitating retrieval, bringing all languages to the same level of technological advancement will allow for easier conversion of all language versions of documents to other formats, namely PDF and HTML. Furthermore, the optical disk system is being re-engineered to operate on a more current technology based on magnetic disks — rather than optical platters — and Notes Domino. The implementation of this new system, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2000, will provide concurrent access to a much higher number of users than at present.